

A long, long road to easing traffic

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After many years of working behind the scenes, officials on Monday celebrated the start of construction on the Western Bypass.

[PHOTO]McHenry County Economic Development Corporation Chairman Gary P. Overbay (left) applauds Algonquin Village President John Schmitt as he acknowledges a bypass bridge will be named after him. (H. Rick Bamman – hbamman@shawmedia.com)

ALGONQUIN – When Gary Overbay, chairman of the McHenry County Economic Development Corp. board, spoke at a groundbreaking ceremony for the Algonquin Western Bypass, he said people have been trying to make the bypass a reality for 16 or 40 years, depending on whom you ask.

The remark received a laugh from the crowd gathered to celebrate the construction of 2.11 miles of four-lane divided highway west of downtown. But finding a way to fix congestion at Routes 31 and 62 had been on the mind of McHenry County residents for quite a while.

Research into a solution for traffic began about 40 years ago.

For a number of years, many thought the best way to solve the congestion would be with a bridge to the north of Algonquin across the Fox River, and a route between Route 14 and Algonquin Road, which is Route 62.

But before people could come to a consensus, there was worry about environmental damage. Other concerns were whether the road would be too close to residential areas, whether it would take houses and whether it would cut neighborhoods in half.

Sixteen years ago, in 1996, an advisory commission of people from various groups and viewpoints was formed for public input and for the people to see how decisions were made. Also, the framework of the discussion was changed from “Where to put the northern bypass” to “How to fix the traffic at Route 62 and Route 31?”

“It wasn’t this project, it was, ‘How do we solve the problems with transportation in Algonquin, without going through people’s houses, making Main Street a four-lane highway, or eliminating Harrison Street to make it northbound Route 31?’” Algonquin Village President John Schmitt said. “The county had a vision to put together the advisory commission to study all the plans.”

The commission looked at 15 options, which included northern bypass routes, western bypass routes, an overpass in downtown Algonquin, more bridges across the Fox River, and even a tunnel under the river. Widening Route 62 to six lanes or Route 31 to four lanes also were researched.

After contentious meetings, three public events attended by more than 1,000 people and three years of work, there came the recommendation, 15-0, to build the Western Bypass.

“At that point, we thought the hard part was over, after 30 years,” Overbay said. “It was a plan everyone could get behind, even if it wasn’t one of their favorites.”

Still, preparation was needed before construction. The Illinois Department of Natural Resources wanted to make sure the area for the bypass wasn’t habitat for the endangered Indiana bat. No such bats were found in the area. But two types of endangered plants were found to have grown along the path of the future road. How they got there is not known, Overbay said. So workers had to move about 50 five-gallon buckets’ worth of plants from the route to The Hollows to get the project moving.

Soil samples also had to be analyzed to make sure any possible ground contamination wasn’t too high. Along the way, IDOT had to obtain property, including the former Toastmaster property and the Parkside Auto Center, and then demolish buildings for the road.

After lobbying by former McHenry County Board Transportation Committee Chairman Bill Dwyer, U.S. Rep. Don Manzullo secured \$9 million for the “Congestion mitigation project at Illinois Route 62, and Illinois Route 31” in a 1998 federal transportation bill. U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin and then-Sen. Barack Obama, and U.S. Rep. Melissa Bean were able to secure \$10 million more in funding in 2005.

Even though all of the regulatory details were taken care of, money still was needed for construction. Initially it was included in the Build Illinois Program, but that money went away. “As environmental studies were being completed and state finances were a challenge, funds dedicated to the project dwindled, and finally disappeared,” Overbay said.

So the McHenry County Better Roads Coalition was formed. Members went to Springfield with 177 boxed lunches, jokingly called road kill, to give to legislators. Each lunch came with a flier describing the project.

Eventually money for the project was included the Illinois Jobs Now Capital Plan.

Today, FH Paschen/S.N. Nielsen Construction Co. is building the bypass for \$33.3 million.

Including engineering costs, environmental studies, land acquisition, demolition of buildings and construction, state, federal and county governments are estimated to have \$70.5 million in the project since 1996, Overbay said.

It was a long process just to get dirt moving, with people always asking when construction would start. “All along the way, it wasn’t just, ‘This is the right thing to do, let’s do it.’ That would be easy,” Schmitt said. “When my neighbors ask me, ‘Why don’t you get this highway done?’ ‘Well ... It will be done in 10 or 15 years.’ They can’t understand why it will take so long. It’s a lot of work by a lot of people,” he said.